Boochani Bound: A Promethean Meditation on Refugee Detention Centres

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Inside and Outside

In 2016, the Indigenous author Melissa Lucashenko delivered the Barry Andrews Memorial Lecture, a speech that was published the following year in *JASAL* as 'I Pity the Poor Immigrant'. This remarkable text bears the following epigraph: '*Dedicated to all refugees currently imprisoned by the Australian State*' (1, original italics). The obvious context for Lucashenko's statement is the ongoing political discussion about the Australian government's treatment of asylum seekers, centred around the draconian practice of imprisoning refugees in off-shore processing centres such as Nauru and Manus Island. Australian literary authors have been particularly vocal in their criticism of the injustice of these policies: in 2015, for instance, Tim Winton published 'Start the Soul-Searching Australia', a Palm Sunday editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in which he pleaded for a change of heart based on a mixture of Australian and religious values; in 2017, Felicity Castagna published the novel *No More Boats*, set during the 2001 Tampa crisis when a Norwegian cargo ship carrying 438 refugees was refused entry into Australia, an incident that shaped that year's federal election and the policy that later became known as the Pacific Solution; while in 2018, Michelle de Kretser used her speech accepting the Miles Franklin Award for *The Life to Come* to excoriate Australia's politicians for the use of detention centres on Nauru and Manus. The literary moment of greatest impact, however, has been the publication in July 2018 of Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, a blend of memoir and poetry written in Farsi that Boochani wrote in prison, then secretly transmitted to his translator, Omid Tofighian, via text messages.

Shortly after it was published, the *Australian Book Review* hailed *No Friend But the Mountains* as a landmark in Australian literature. Felicity Plunkett's review in that publication places Boochani, as a witness and

scribe to terrible historical events, alongside Holocaust-inspired works such as Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* (1947) and Victor E. Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946). In his foreword, Richard Flanagan provides a further point of comparison:

> *No Friend but the Mountains* is a book that can rightly take its place on the shelf of world prison literature, alongside such diverse works as Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Ray Parkin's *Into The Smother*, Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, and Martin Luther King Jr's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. (Flanagan in Boochani xi)

Apart from his literary fame, Flanagan was clearly chosen for this task because of his Booker Prize-winning novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013), which depicts the cruelty of the Japanese toward the Australian POWs working on the Burma Railway during World War II, a cruelty that is mirrored in the detention camps that Boochani describes in his book. 'During my lifetime no act of the Australian state has been as terrible as the abandonment, the virtual indefinite imprisonment, of 2000 innocent and desperate refugees and asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island,' writes Robert Manne in his review for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. 'Most have already been marooned for five years or even longer' (Manne np). Boochani's book has thus been caught up in a swell of political protest that, on January 31, 2019, saw *No Friend But the Mountains* awarded both the Victorian Premier's Prize for Literature and Non-Fiction, with a special exception being made for the fact that he is neither an Australian citizen nor a resident. It has since garnered further recognition by taking out the NSW Premier's Award for Non-Fiction (April 2019) and the General Fiction Book of the Year at the Australian Book Industry Awards (May 2019).

While my own views align with the criticism of Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, it is important to recognise that Boochani's text explores something greater than just this particular political moment. *No Friend But the Mountains* will inevitably be framed by its controversial political context, but readers should not overlook its literary qualities. Boochani's book is an extraordinary hybrid text that brings together fictional and non-fictional prose, peppered with bursts of lyrical poetry, literary techniques that allow him to explore beyond the limits of conventional political discourse. Boochani thus plays with contradictions, hallucinations, jumps in time, and other literary strategies that are more characteristic of a modern novel than a historical report. The narrator's perspective on his circumstances is filtered through the sophisticated cultural context of Boochani's upbringing: consider, for example, characters like Golshifteh, the fierce Iranian woman who rallies the exhausted refugees in the face of disaster (named in honour of Golshifteh Farahani, an actress and revolutionary artist whom Boochani admires), or Mani With The Bowed Leg, a self-conscious nod to the ancient founder of Manichaeism. Indeed, it is Boochani's brilliant use of symbolic nicknames throughout the text that does the most to blur reality into fiction, animating figures like The Cadaver and The Blue Eyed Boy, as though life itself has become a walking, breathing allegory. Boochani mixes together these references with a modern sensibility taken mainly from Western existentialist fiction, including Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), and Samuel Beckett's trilogy, all key texts that, according to his translator, he was reading during the book's composition. With its masterful blend of influences and styles, *No Friend But the Mountains* is a work that deserves, in addition to its political context, to be read as a serious and important work of literature.

Boochani's book is also guided by an intellectual framework that draws on a sophisticated theoretical critique of power and the modern state. In the 'Translator's Reflections' that follow the book's main text, Omid Tofighian explains that *No Friend But the Mountains* is 'only the beginning of a more in-depth and multifaceted project that we refer to as the *Manus Prison Theory*' (Boochani 362), the main task of which is to critique the way that nation-states police their borders. Boochani's book thus articulates a purpose that extends beyond publicity and consciousness-raising.

> In contrast to the thriving 'refugee industry' that promotes stories to provide exposure and information and attempts to create empathy (if that is at all possible), Behrouz recounts stories in order to produce new knowledge and to construct a philosophy that unpacks and exposes systematic torture and the border-industrial complex. His intention has always been to hold a mirror up to the system, dismantle it, and produce a historical record to honour those who have been killed and everyone who is still suffering. Behrouz's book also functions as an edifying message to future generations. (373)

This stated ambition makes the book more than a sophisticated eyewitness account of the detention camps by suggesting that, alongside Boochani's narrative, there exists a project of theorising both their meaning and, in an echo of Frankl, what that meaning reveals more broadly about the state of our humanity.

It is from this perspective that I want to return for a moment to Lucashenko's epigraph, which announces her solidarity with '*all refugees imprisoned by the Australian State*' (1, original italics). The horrendous conditions and institutional brutality that Boochani describes in the prison on Manus Island pushes the ethical claims of the asylum seekers to the front of our minds. At the same time, there is an ingenious double meaning to Lucashenko's statement that emerges in the course of her text. For while the obvious referent of her sentence is the refugees on Nauru and Manus who are being kept *outside* of Australia, the content of her text extends this referent to all those refugees who are already *inside* the Australian State. The Bob Dylan-inspired allusion in her title makes it clear that the term 'immigrant', for Lucashenko, refers to all non-Indigenous people living in Australia, while also subtly defining the 'Australian State' as an equally foreign entity that has forcibly imposed itself on what will always remain Indigenous land. With this single sentence, Lucashenko brilliantly unpicks the reductive morality of inside and outside. Allowing asylum seekers to enter Australia may be the morally right and compassionate thing to do, but no-one who arrives on these shores can escape becoming embroiled in the colonial apparatus of the Australian State.

While Boochani's descriptions of the desperate plight of asylum seekers, the dangerous conditions they endure in their attempt to reach a place of safety, and the terrible conditions in the prison camps on Manus Island are powerful in their sheer, visceral awfulness, the most powerful moments are those in which he explores the inescapability of human power structures. Sometimes this condition refers to the modern state that sets its dominion over every part of the planet, leaving the 'stateless' Boochani to negotiate his way through the cracks in this apparatus. Most often, though, Boochani reflects on how the institutional hierarchy of a prison seeps into the identity of the inmates, making them unwilling collaborators with their own oppression. 'The weak always consider themselves powerful when they see others suffering,' he observes. 'But the collapse of others appeals to the oppressor in all of us. The collapse of others becomes a cause to celebrate our own state' (54). This crumbling of the division between inside and outside, victim and oppressor, is echoed in Tofighian's brilliant meditation on two contrasting islands:

> There is an island isolated in a silent ocean where people are held prisoner. The people cannot experience the world beyond the island. They cannot see the immediate society outside the prison and they certainly do not learn about what takes place in other parts of the world. They only see each other and hear the stories they tell one another. This is their reality; they are frustrated by their isolation and incarceration, but they have also been taught to accept their predicament. News somehow enters the prison about another island where the mind is free to know and create. The prisoners are given a sense of what life is like on the other island but they do not have the capacity or experience to understand fully. (359)

As with Lucashenko's cleverly-constructed epigraph, this description initially leads the reader to expect that the first island, with its incarceration and isolation, must be Manus, while the second is Australia. 'The first island is the settler-colonial state called Australia, and the prisoners are the settlers', reveals Tofighian, in a startling reversal. 'The second island contains Manus Prison, and knowledge resides there with the incarcerated refugees' (360). The physical prison may be located on Manus Island, but for both Lucashenko and Tofighian, the true source of oppression and incarceration is the Australian State.

The Promethean Gesture

The logic of the nation-state is inherently totalitarian, forbidding as it does any idea of an 'outside', with the result that the whole world has been integrated into this system. The word 'stateless' might seem, at first, to designate a position that is outside the state, but in reality it simply means that one is still within the state, but stripped of any legal status or power. To be stateless is simply to be at the mercy of the absolute authority of the state, not to be free of it. As a Kurd, Boochani comes from an ethnic group that has already existed in a stateless limbo for many years, a context he alludes to in various subtle ways. In Chapter 12 of *No Friend But the Mountains*, for instance, he describes a prisoner revolt on Manus during which the generator shuts off, plunging the prison into a chaotic darkness in which one prisoner cries out in Kurdish: '*dālega*!' (347). This word means 'mother', a term specific to the Feyli Kurds who live near the border of Iraq and Iran, stateless because neither country will acknowledge its Kurdish inhabitants as citizens even though they have lived there for thousands of years. The same is true of the Stateless Rohingya Boy in Boochani's text, who has fled a similar situation in Myanmar. Many of the asylum seekers have come from similar circumstances where the absolute power of the state is felt most harshly by those who are 'outside' its official limits.

The division between speech and authority long precedes the advent of the modern nation-state, however, with the examination of the limits of absolute power in literature stretching back to ancient times. Tofighian points out that the literary framework for *No Friend But the Mountains*, for instance, is provided by 'Kurdish folklore and resistance, Persian literature, sacred narrative traditions, local histories and nature symbols, ritual and ceremony' (387), while early on in the book Boochani refers to his journey to Australia on more than one occasion as an 'odyssey' (57). This reference has an ironic ring to it, given that Boochani, unlike Odysseus, is fleeing in search of a new home rather than returning to reclaim a familiar one. Instead of Homer, though, the classical text that kept turning over in my mind while reading *No Friend But the Mountains*, as reflected in the title of this essay, was Aeschylus's tragedy *Prometheus Bound*. In that play, the titan Prometheus, who stole fire from Olympus to give to humanity, is condemned by Zeus, the all-powerful king of the gods, to be chained to a rock and have his liver pecked out by an eagle (symbol of Zeus) in a cycle of never-ending torture. Particularly striking is an early speech by the god Hephaestus, who is charged with binding Prometheus to the rock:

> Son of sagacious Themis, god of mountainous thoughts,
> With heart as sore as yours I now shall fasten you
> In bands of bronze immovable to this desolate peak,
> Where you will hear no voice, nor see a human form;
> But scorched with the sun's flaming rays your skin will lose
> Its bloom of freshness. Glad you will be to see the night
> Cloaking the day with her dark spangled robe; and glad
> Again when the sun's warmth scatters the frost at dawn.
> Each changing hour will bring successive pain to rack
> Your body; and no man yet born shall set you free.
> Your kindness to the human race has earned you this. (21)

Hephaestus's words are delivered with a mixture of pity and sorrow at having to treat his fellow god in this way, a sentiment that echoes the mood of Prometheus's interlocutors, who try unsuccessfully to persuade the arrogant captive that he should bow to Zeus's authority. Aeschylus's play makes his audience contemplate how, although Prometheus's compassion for humanity and critique of Zeus's tyranny are faultless in their logic, his words are useless in the context of the latter's supreme power. Zeus's might flies in the face of reason, so that Prometheus's 'mountainous thoughts', like Boochani's, cannot, in and of themselves, release him from the rock of his suffering.

Other authors that repeatedly came to mind while reading *No Friend But the Mountains* were Kafka—particularly works like *The Trial* and 'In the Penal Colony' (1919), which both deal with systems of legal retribution that have perversely turned against their own principles of justice—and the Marquis de Sade, a writer that Flanagan leaves off his list of classic prison literature. It is not hard to see why, since Flanagan's selection of works is obviously constructed with a particular agenda in mind. Consider the authors he selects, the least well-known of which is the Australian author Ray Parkin, whose *Into the Smother* (1963) describes the terrible conditions on the Thai-Burma Railway in a way that influenced Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the North*. The other authors on Flanagan's list are all writers whose names, despite the injustices inflicted on them, carry the moral weight of being on the right side of history: Oscar Wilde, Antonio Gramsci, Wole Soyinka, and Martin Luther King, Jr. are all strategically chosen because they resonate heroically with a spirit of resistance and moral clarity in the face of prejudice and tyranny. They are the Prometheans who spoke truth to power, the moral authority of their words ultimately triumphing over the unjust might of the state that oppressed them.

Without wishing to diminish the legacy of the aforementioned authors in any way, I think it is important to recognise and overcome the naïveté of believing that the state can be shamed into correcting its inherent brutality by words and ethical reasoning. To do so is to assume, wrongly, that the state possesses a single, centralised conscience that can be persuaded, rather than existing as a structure of power that constantly displaces the responsibility for its own authority elsewhere. Kafka's insights into this decentralised structure echo throughout *The Trial*, in which the protagonist, Joseph K., is placed arbitrarily under arrest, with the narrative following the twists and turns of his labyrinthine attempt to clear his name. As Kafka observes in the parable 'Before the Law', the gatekeepers of authority are arranged in an infinite hierarchy that cannot be transcended. Boochani and his fellow prisoners find themselves operating under an eerily similar set of conditions, in which any attempt to appeal to the gatekeeper/prison guard wielding authority over them leads to an endless displacement of power:

> Whenever a stubborn prisoner makes inquiries and finds The Boss of that individual who has said 'The Boss has given orders' and then confronts that person, that person also responds with 'The Boss has given orders.' It is just a pointless effort. All the rules, all the regulations, and all the questions about those rules and regulations are all referred

> back to one person: The Boss. It is astonishing how The Boss also responds with 'The Boss has given orders.' A long chain ascending through the hierarchy. The bureaucratic ranks are determined by relationships of power. Every boss is subordinate to another boss. And the superior boss is also subordinate to another boss. If one investigated this chain it would possibly lead to thousands of other bosses. All of them repeating the one thing: 'The Boss has given orders.' (Boochani 211–212)

This endless displacement of power is characteristic of the authority of the modern state—Slavoj Žižek notes the same phenomenon under Stalin's rule, for example, in which lower officials solved the dilemma of being caught between responsibility and power by always devolving power onto those above, a step repeated until the highest levels of the Party who, despite having 'total power in their hands, [...] were not even able to issue explicit orders about what was to be done' (Žižek 107). This infinite deferment means that the Promethean writer's desire to speak truth to power is thwarted by a lack of direct altercation with the source of oppression—even in Aeschylus's play, Prometheus never actually gets to confront Zeus, only his intermediaries.

Parodies of Power

The most important literary precedent that frames my reading of Boochani is the Marquis de Sade, even though he is not referenced directly in *No Friend But the Mountains*, because he shares so many of the same concerns and circumstances as Boochani. The turbulent history of the French revolutionary period required Sade, who spent some thirty-two years of his life incarcerated in various institutions, to wrestle with issues of power and authority, which he explores through the unusual medium of pornographic novels like *Justine* (1791) and *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795). Sade is particularly interested in what he regards as the spurious foundations of human authority, leaving his characters to negotiate a brutally amoral universe in which legal or religious codes have no genuine meaning, a condition that Boochani, similarly, experiences on the boat to Australia. 'For some moments I exert everything to reach something far down inside the deepest existential places of myself,' he writes. 'To find something divine. To grab at it... maybe. But I uncover nothing but myself and a sense of enormous absurdity and futility' (Boochani 29). In these circumstances, the nakedness of the struggle to survive seems to affirm the law of the jungle as the true principle of power:

> There was no justice, none at all, no egalitarian solution, no morally just outcome in the partitioning of that small haul of goods. Yet, according to the law of the jungle it was a quintessential instance of justice. The stronger ended up with the greater share. (Boochani 47)

One of the most common ways of misreading Sade is to assume that his philosophy ends here, with this nihilistic, brutally realist vision of human behaviour. More sophisticated interpretations of his work, however, understand that there is a textual gap that separates an author from his characters, so that we should not confuse the opinions of the libertines with those of Sade himself. Applying these lessons to *No Friend But the Mountains* teaches us, similarly, to understand that although Boochani is writing an experimental memoir, his use of fictional techniques requires a qualitative separation between the actual author and the narrator who appears on the page.

The repeated assertion of the libertines in the Sadian text is that there is no legitimate human power, that Nature represents the only genuine authority, so anything that is possible—including rape and murder—must therefore be 'natural'. Yet as Gilles Deleuze observes in his famous study *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (1967), the perspective of the libertine is radically subverted '*because it is essentially that of a victim*. Only the victim can describe torture' (Deleuze 17, original italics). Deleuze is building here on the groundbreaking analysis of Sade put forward by Georges Bataille in *Eroticism* (1957):

> As a general rule the torturer does not use the language of the violence exerted by him in the name of an established authority; he uses the language of the authority; [...] Sade's attitude is diametrically opposed to that of the torturer. When Sade writes he refuses to cheat, but he attributes his own attitude to people who in real life could only have been silent and uses them to make self-contradictory statements to other people. (Bataille 187–188)

This more subtle mode of reading Sade reveals his writings to be an ironic *performance* of libertinage rather than a genuine advocacy of its principles, opening up a whole new way of understanding his work as an act of resistance. Instead of simply championing the brutality of the amoral universe, in both Sade's and Bouchani's fiction the victim of such cruelty aims instead to place themselves in the position of the oppressor in a double gesture of understanding and caricature.

It is this darkly humorous aspect of Boochani's work, this biting irony that, like Sade, permits him to discern the twisted logic of what, using a term borrowed from feminist theory, he calls the 'Kyriarchal System' (Boochani 124). The source of this Sadian humour emerges from a melancholy contradiction in human psychology, which sees the victim as torn between a rational hatred of the oppressor and a perverse identification with the latter's will to power. The literary outcome of this internal struggle is a grim form of parody that not only holds up a mirror to an abusive system, but also to the writer's perverse mental collaboration in its workings. Boochani observes this struggle in himself, for instance, while on the boat to Australia:

> On one occasion during this trip I was so dazed with hunger that I got up and began threatening other passengers randomly. I recall the exact phrase I blurted: 'Look here, I'm hungry and it's completely natural for me to raid anyone with food… I'm about to do it!' A logical statement. Perhaps even philosophical. But uttered at a time when starvation and the fear of death had impaired my equilibrium. Thinking back, the essence of this performance was a parody of power. Just imagine my behaviour, imagine my gestures, imagine me making that pronouncement. Imagine me, whose ribs are protruding from his body. Imagine me, a man whose ribs are so visible you could count them. Imagine me in this state, trying to assert myself in this way. What a ridiculous scene. (Boochani 51)

This early scene from *No Friend But the Mountains*, which occurs before Boochani arrives on Manus Island, is an important presage of the twisted configurations of state power that form in the prison. The literary qualities of Boochani's writing allow him to explore this ambiguity, to construct a narrative that simultaneously provides insight into the minds of both guards and prisoners. In the political battles over asylum seekers it is easy to lose sight of this dark and ambiguous sense of humour, which emerges when facing the reality of humanity's moral compromises, an irony that blurs the psychological lines between inside and outside, oppressor and victim. Political causes rarely permit such gray areas of ambivalence, but in so doing they omit a vital part of the truth that Boochani uncovers in the course of his narrative.

The significance of this sense of humour only increases as the story of *No Friend But the Mountains* unfolds. Building on Boochani's initial 'parody of power', the advent of the Kyriarchal System gives rise to a whole cast of comic characters that reflect the absurdities of prison rule: figures of subversive fun like the Comedian and the Joker; the Prophet, whose religious authority rallies the prisoners until he is beaten up by the prison guards; the Prime Minister, who tries awkwardly to preserve his dignity in the face of ridicule; The Cow, who greedily monopolises food and cigarettes, even though he does not even smoke; and Maysam the Whore. Maysam the Whore is the most important of these characters, as he uses his charismatic brand of satire to mock the authority of the prison system.

> There is no secret underlying his popularity other than an accumulation of suffering endured by all the prisoners, which shines through his rhythmic movements. Like a mirror, the prisoners see themselves reflected in him. Someone who is so brave and so creative; he flexes these attributes through his muscles, muscles he uses to challenge The Kyriarchal System of the prison. He employs a beautiful form of rebellion that has enormous appeal for the prisoners. A man with boyish features who uses them to peddle poetry and to satirise all the serious aspects of the forlorn prison. The spirit of Maysam the Whore contrasts with the desert of solitude and horror of the prison. (137–138)

For all the grimness of his narrative, this humorous style of literary writing represents the true spirit of Boochani's book, a comic mode that, far from excluding tragedy, feeds on the absurd cruelty of the prison system in order to perform its parody of power. Such a perspective is made possible by the Sadian insight that discourses of justice are complicated by the victim's own will to power, a moral compromise that Boochani shows repeatedly by demonstrating that the Kyriarchal System relies on the prisoners collaborating in their own oppression. The necessity of power to human existence, even when it is a power that is drawn masochistically from the prisoners' own self-debasement, means that one can never truly be outside the struggle for power and the possibility of injustice that entails.

Conclusion

The political struggle in Australia over the treatment of refugees will continue, whether in the arena of party politics, in the media, or in the intellectual domain of books and literature. There is already a small group of recently published texts dedicated to this topic, headed by works of investigative journalism such as Jane McAdam and Fiona Chong's *Refugees: Why Seeking Asylum in Australia is Legal and Australia's Policies*

are Not (2014), Madeline Gleeson's *Offshore: Behind the Wire at Manus and Nauru* (2016), and Mark Isaacs' *The Undesirables: Inside Nauru* (2017), as well as a collection of first-hand accounts, including a chapter from Boochani, in *They Cannot Take the Sky: Stories from Detention* (2017). While these political gestures are important, the genius of *No Friend But the Mountains* ultimately lies in the way that Boochani is able to use the literary form to place himself simultaneously inside and outside the system of power he describes, to know from experience what it is like to be a victim while using fiction to understand the psychology of power that drives the oppressor. The creation of this liminal space makes it possible for him to address the immediate injustices of detaining refugees, while at the same time giving the reader the tools to recognise and dismantle the system that produced this injustice in the first place. This insight shows how a literary view of ethics can positively supplement the moral pragmatism of conventional politics: the latter's greater short-term effectiveness should be accompanied by a genuine reformation of the psychology of oppression that underlies the system. Until that changes and we learn to hear the wisdom revealed by the literary voice that Boochani enacts so brilliantly in *No Friend But the Mountains*, the two islands, Australia and Manus, will continue to be a mirror image of each other's failures.

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